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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BRATISLAVA 000560

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TAGS: HU LO PREL PGOV
SUBJECT: SLOVAKIA: PM FICO RAISES SLOVAK-HUNGARIAN DISPUTE
TO NEW LEVEL

REF: A) BRATISLAVA 540 B) BRATISLAVA 546

Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee, for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary. Past may not be prologue in Central Europe, but it is certainly present. A simmering dispute regarding the post-World War Two era "Benes Decrees" gained momentum when the Slovak Parliament adopted on September 20 a resolution reaffirming the inviolability of the Decrees. Hungarian parliamentarians reacted by canceling planned meetings and visits with Slovak counterparts. During an October 2 press conference, Foreign Minister Kubis sought to distance the government from the growing dispute by drawing distinctions between the position of the government and that of members of the governing coalition (in particular, Jan Slota, whose Slovak National Party (SNS) drafted the resolution and whose outrageous comments regarding Hungarians and the head of the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK) have drawn widespread opprobrium). Kubis directly criticized Slota, but he also criticized Hungarian Coalition leader Pal Csaky for provoking sentiment by calling for compensation. The MFA already had already tried this tack during a September 27 briefing by State Secretary Algayerova for EU and NATO ambassadors. Algayerova stressed that the non-binding resolution had no practical effects and characterized the Hungarian reaction as "surprising." She laid blamed for the controversy on the doorstep of politicians, over whom the government has "no control."

¶2. (C) Now, another politician -- who also happens to be the Prime Minister -- has weighed in sharply and publicly against the Hungarian President, Laszlo Solyom, following his "private" visit to southern Slovakia on October 2. Fico said Solyom had abused the visit for political purposes, and that the GOS would not permit him to behave "as if he were in northern Hungary." Although the PM has a point regarding Solyom's slight of Slovak President Gasparovic during the visit, Fico's comments have upped the ante, contributing to what FM Kubis characterizes as a "potentially explosive situation," which neither the Slovaks nor the Hungarians have the political will to resolve. On October 6, Speaker of the Hungarian Parliament, Katalin Szili, also paid a "private" visit to Slovakia to participate in a commemoration of Hungarian families who had been deported under the Benes Decrees although she had canceled her participation in an event hosted by her Slovak counterpart only two days earlier.

On the same day, Slovak Minister of Culture, Marek Madaric, claimed in an interview on Slovak Radio that not one Hungarian had been expelled in the late 1940s because of his/her nationality. While the entire affair does not seem to resonate much with most ordinary Slovaks, it is another setback for Slovak-Hungarian cooperation, which had already been hampered by the lingering effects of the Malinova case. Meanwhile, this unhelpful foray into the past is part of a worrisome trend in Slovakia, which includes persistent

governmental attacks on the media, as well as attempts by the government to constrain NGO's; to limit the public's access to information; and to lionize (or rehabilitate), through legislation and other means, controversial figures from Slovakia's past, e.g., Father Andrej Hlinka. End Summary.

The Past: Benes Decrees

¶ 13. (SBU) Pursuant to some of the so-called Benes Decrees, promulgated by Czechoslovak President Eduard Benes during and after WWII, thousands of Hungarians (and Germans) had their property confiscated, their citizenship revoked, and were forcibly resettled or deported. While the decrees were aimed at Nazi collaborators, many innocent ethnic Hungarians and Germans were persecuted and deprived of their rights. The Slovaks and Czechs, however, argue that the Decrees -- which remain part of the legal canons in both states -- must be seen in the context of the wartime injustices visited upon then-Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany and its Hungarian ally. Despite this stance, in 1989, then-Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel formally apologized for the government's post-war treatment of ethnic Germans. Although Havel's statement was widely criticized at home, it helped lay the basis for mutual reconciliation. No such apology was ever made to the Hungarians by either the Czechs or the Slovaks.

¶ 14. (SBU) In 2001, the Embassy reported the views of Slovak politicians and historians on the possible re-opening of the Benes Decrees. The issue had come to the fore because then-Hungarian PM Orban had called for the annulment of the Decrees prior to Czech and Slovak entry into the EU. The historians agreed that the opening of the issue could trigger

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an "unprecedented series of consequences for a number of European countries," and that dwelling on restitution or retribution was a "dangerous political game." The cable concluded with this comment: Many believe that as soon as both Hungary and Slovakia become EU members with transparent borders, the Benes Decrees will stop hunting politicians in these and other European countries."

¶ 15. (C) Three years after the end of the Meciar era, that prediction was reasonable. Then-Prime Minister Dzurinda's government was focused on EU and NATO accession and had begun to make progress in remedying the problems created by the authoritarian, statist, and anti-Western Meciar. It seemed as if Slovakia had turned an important page in its difficult post-communist transition, and that EU membership would enable (indeed, require) Central Europe to set aside past wounds and conflicts. At that time, it would have been difficult to imagine that the Slovak government in 2007 would include none other than Vladimir Meciar's HZDS and Jan Slota's SNS. Nor might one have expected, eighteen years after the Velvet Revolution, that so many key figures in the coalition -- including the PM, himself - would be former communists.

The Present: A Wicked Brew: Slota, Csaky and...Fico

¶ 16. (C) Let's fast forward to August 2006, when ethnic Hungarian student Hedviga Malinova claimed that she was brutally attacked by Slovak extremists after they heard her speaking Hungarian on her cell phone. Although PM Fico initially pledged a robust investigation into the reported crime and strongly denounced all forms of extremism and intolerance, within weeks he and Interior Minister Kalinak announced that Malinova had lied and the attack had never happened. Fico, referring to the criticism that had been leveled against Slovakia as a result of the widely-publicized incident, said that the government would not tolerate someone destroying the good reputation of Slovakia with lies. Since

then, evidence has come to light challenging the government's account, and the Prosecutor General acknowledged last month that "mistakes" had been made in the investigation of the incident. Although both the SNS and SMK eagerly exploited the incident for political purposes, it is clear that the government's handling of the incident contributed to a polarization of the debate on minority issues, and strained relations with Hungary. Fico and his Hungarian counterpart did not meet on a bilateral basis for almost a year after the incident. The case also serves as a prime example of how the Fico government, despite its protestations, allows the nationalist and xenophobic elements of the coalition to influence its approach. (On the other hand, Smer often seems to need no prodding. As the Embassy reported ref a, it was Smer, not SNS or HZDS, that proposed nationalist-oriented legislation tightening requirements for citizenship. Party members told us at the time of coalition building last year that the nationalist elements of Smer were the majority.)

¶7. (C) While SNS leader Jan Slota has consistently sought -- often using vulgar and provocative language -- to portray Hungarian aspirations as a threat to the Slovak nation, SMK -- no longer constrained by participation in government -- also has been much more willing to play politics with sensitive issues like the Malinova case and the Benes Decrees. As Kubis and others have noted, Slota and SMK are mutually reinforcing. In a meeting with PolEcon Chief on October 1, SMK Chief Pal Csaky sought to downplay his proposals regarding the Decrees. They were not made in Parliament, he said, but were "merely a response" to the requests of his constituency on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the deportations. But Csaky, who took over the leadership of the party in March, is a savvy pol. He undoubtedly knew that his sop to a shrinking electoral base -- especially his comments on reparation -- would set in motion a divisive debate that would resonate beyond Slovakia's borders. Indeed, it seems clear that was his intent. Csaky's predecessor, Bela Bugar, likely would not have pushed the issue as hard and recently softly criticized the visit of President Solyom in the press. The Smer-led government has been embarrassed and put on the defensive by Slota's crude rhetoric (he referred to Csaky as vomit and manure) and, despite its earlier attempts to remain above the fray, has joined the tit-for-tat following the Csaky-engineered visit of Hungarian President Solyom to Slovakia. And, on October 4, reportedly in reaction to Slota's rhetoric, the Party of European Socialists (PES) decided that it was not yet prepared to reinstate Smer's membership (ref b). PES Deputy Chairman Swoboda also stated

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that the government's attitudes toward minorities would play a factor in Smer's readmittance.

8.(C) Despite these tactical victories, Csaky is playing a risky game. His stated priority -- preserving and expanding the rights gained by Hungarians under the Dzurinda government -- will become harder to achieve in this polarized environment. The same might be said about Fico, who, having brought SNS into the coalition, now finds himself defending the positions -- if not the precise words -- of a corrupt xenophobe. As one prominent NGO leader recently stated, certain aspects of the current political scene feel more like 1997 than 2007. Although Fico has the good fortune to lead during a period of unprecedented growth and prosperity, his is not a particularly open or confident style of governance. More often than not, it's "us or them" for Fico and his partners, and the tools used to undermine opponents are often blunt. Depending on the situation, "they" are the Hungarians, the NGOs, the media, foreign investors, Brussels and/or Washington. In the coming weeks "they" will be those who object to SNS's draft law to venerate controversial cleric Andrej Hlinka as the "Father of the Nation." (An earlier version of the bill included a provision -- since dropped -- that would have made it a crime to criticize Hlinka.) Hlinka, a Catholic priest and politician who died

in 1938, is revered by some Slovaks for what they view as his pursuit of greater rights for Slovakia within the first Czechoslovak state. He was also an authoritarian and confessional figure whose successor, Father Jozef Tiso, became the head of the WWII Slovak Fascist state. Although Fico has publicly stated that this bill is not a "priority" for Smer, and Smer MPs are under no obligation to support it, debate on the bill is likely to be even more divisive (at least domestically) than that regarding the Benes Decrees, and about as productive. Unfortunately, former PM Dzurinda told his SDKU colleagues that they should support the resolution for tactical political reasons, relating to restricting the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) from occupying the political space.

¶9. (C) Comment: Although Prime Ministers Fico and Gyurcsany will see one another at the upcoming EU Ministerial in Portugal on October 18-19, we have no reason to believe that Fico will take the initiative to quell the controversy over the Benes Decrees. Nor, for that matter, do we expect SMK to turn down the heat. The upcoming parliamentary debates on the Hlinka law, and another proposal to commemorate the shooting of 15 Slovaks by Hungarian gendarmerie in 1907 (in an incident directly related to Hlinka) will serve to raise, not lower, Slovak-Hungarian tensions. While the polemics from all sides regarding the decrees stem largely from current-day political imperatives, it is clear that Slovakia still needs to come to terms with important issues in its past. Unfortunately, given the current political situation, we doubt that the requisite dispassion, objectivity or understanding exists for such a process to unfold in a way that benefits the country. End Comment.

VALLEE